

# Perspective Taking in PAR with Youth

Kitty Jurrius, Stichting Alexander

*Participatory youth research is a type of research that engages young people as partners in every stage of the research process. Positive attitudes to youth participation throughout the Western world have prompted substantial developments in the field of participatory youth research in the past 30 years. PAR with youth aims at producing knowledge through the perspective of youth, at the empowerment of youth and at realising improvements in policy. Research on the quality of the research method shows a relation between PAR with youth and the development of perspective taking skills of young people. Researching the views of other youngsters, young researchers encounter various views of others. Perspective taking is considered an important social skill. Is PAR with youth a way to strengthen this skill?*

## Introduction and background

Participatory youth research –also known as participatory action research with youth or peer research– involves youth in various stages of research. It gained popularity throughout the Western world in the past three decades. Examples of participatory youth research can be encountered in several areas. In the field of youth care, young people have researched the views of youths on foster care, on the chain of youth care facilities and on residential care. In the field of education, students have studied the quality of their school and school absenteeism. Moroccan adolescents have conducted research on their peers' experiences with their upbringing in the Netherlands. Recently, young people in Amsterdam cooperated with the GGD (Dutch local health service) to research sexual behaviour of youth. PAR with youth implies that young people are involved in operationalizing the research questions. They are trained and coached in collecting and interpreting the data. An interview training or observation training, in which listening, asking questions and neutrality are trained is followed by young people who carry out the research. (Cole, 1981; Alder & Sandor, 1990; Wilkins, Bryans en Hetzel, 1993; Hart, 1992; van Beers, 1996; Bemak, 1996; Dallape, 1996; Kefyalew, 1996; Nieuwenhuys, 1997; Penuel & Freeman, 1997; Hazekamp, 1999, 2003; Noom & De Winter, 2001; Westerlaak, 2003; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Pehlivan, 2003; Pieper, 2003; De Winter & Kroneman, 2003; Jurrius & Havinga, 2004; Jurrius, Straatsma & Strating, 2004; De Jong, 2004; GGD Amsterdam, 2006; Moonen 2006).

While the popularity of the method increased, questions were raised about the quality of this relatively young research method. What is the quality of the knowledge obtained? Does it result in participation and tangible changes? In 2005, a literature study was carried out to identify criteria that apply to participatory youth research (Jurrius, 2005). The study identified the following four criteria:

- Quality of participation

- Scientific quality
- Effect
- Feasibility

The quality of participation refers to the way young people are involved in the research. To which extent are they involved in the consecutive steps of the research process, and what is the quality of this participation: are young people actually involved, or is it just a matter of *tokenism*? (Jurrius, 2006) Scientific quality refers to the quality of the knowledge produced by participatory youth research. Questions on validity and reliability with regard to PAR with youth are posed, and the knowledge the research produced is valued. Effect entails the extent to which the research has effect on policy and people: do young people learn something due to their participation, is their position reinforced, are there improvements being realised based on the results? Feasibility involves costs and capacity.

To gain more insight in the application of these criteria, in 2006, seven Dutch cases of participatory youth research were analysed. The first results yielded challenges with regard to the quality of the participation. (Jurrius 2006) This article focuses on another aspect of the results: the effects of PAR with youth on young people who participate as researchers. Young people interviewed claim that they acquired several abilities by participating in PAR with youth. Among these abilities they mention communication skills, organisational skills, interviewing skills, listening skills. It is noteworthy that a number of these skills were linked to perspective taking.

Perspective taking is usually considered an important social skill. Through this skill people can put themselves in someone else's position and are able to resolve problems together. Children who do not master these skills, repeatedly find themselves in problematic social situations (Collot d' Escury and Hengst, 2006). There are many definitions of perspective taking. Johnson (1975) defines perspective taking as the ability to understand how a situation comes across: the ability to put oneself in someone else's position and to recognize that other individuals can have a view that differs from their own. Berk (2003) defines perspective taking as the ability to imagine what other people think and feel. Perspective taking is important for resolving conflicts and differences of opinion. (o.a. Corcoran, 2000). Dixon and Moore (1990) plead for distinguishing between the information someone has and the way this information is valued.

There are several theories on how perspective taking skills develop with children. Some theories stress that the ability to take perspective increases as children grow up. Other theories emphasize the influence of the environment. With regard to the first mentioned theories, there is discussion about the extent to which adults are more capable of taking perspective than young people. Selmans (1980) theory on perspective taking is based on the relation between age and the growing ability to take perspective. He distinguishes five stages of perspective taking. Each stage refers to decreasing egocentrism and increasing skills to take perspective. Several authors suggest that during adolescence, increasing skills to take perspective go hand in hand with the development of one's own identity. Adolescence is characterized by being self-centered, sensitivity to the opinion

of others and overrating of one's own cognitive abilities (Seifert and Hoffnung, 1997, Goossens and Jacksons, 2006).

In response to the assumption that egocentrism decreases as someone grows older, several researchers have focused on perspective taking by adults (a.o. Frankenberger, 2000). They conclude for example that adults unjustly assume that others share their perspective. Fenigstein en Abrams (1993) label this 'the egocentric assumption of shared perspectives'. Epley and others (2004) state that many adults are still egocentric but conclude, based on their experiment, that adults are sometimes more able to correct their initial egocentric reaction. (Epley a.o. 2004).

The theories mentioned here focus on the relation between age and the ability to take perspective. Other theories emphasize the importance of environment for the development of perspective taking skills. Children of the same age do not possess the same perspective taking skills. The use of training, games and role plays for children and young people that focus on perspective taking is based on the assumption that perspective taking is a skill people can learn. (Chalmers & Townsend, 1990, Gerris a.o., 1997, Berk, 2003, Collot d'Escury e.a., 2004, Gillespie, 2006).

Assuming that perspective taking can be learned, it is interesting to know how this skill can be acquired. The results of the research on the quality of participatory youth research show some indications. This article focuses on the question how perspective taking skills can be recognized in the skills the young researchers claim they have acquired by participating in research. In this article, perspective taking will be defined as the ability to put oneself in another's position. In accordance with Dixon and Moore (1990) the way young people weigh the opinion of others is also taken into account. The young researchers are those young people (aged 12-21) who were involved as researchers.

Next, the article will briefly describe the method used to gain insight into the results of participatory youth research. The young researchers interviewed were not specifically asked whether they acquired perspective taking skills through their participation. The interviews focused on what young people gained through their participation in general. The results section shows how perspective taking and weighing can be recognized in the answers of the respondents. The discussion section aims at discussing the implications of these results for the relation between participatory youth research and perspective taking skills.

## **Method**

In-depth interviews were held with 82 professionals and young people involved in seven research projects. The interviews took place during the first half of 2006. The cases were selected from research projects that were implemented together with youth in the Netherlands during the past ten years, varying on the topics researched, the research organisations, the orientation and the year in which the research was conducted (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Overview of cases**

Case	Research on...	Organization	Orientation	Year	Interv
1	Several topics	Codename Future	National	2006	13
2	Sexual behaviour	GGD Amsterdam	Local	2006	0
3	Several topics	Nationale jeugdraad	National	2005	10
4	Needs of youth in Gouda	PJ Partners	Local	2005	4
5	Quality of youth care	Stichting Alexander	Local	2003	6
6	Upbringing of Moroccan youth	JP2000+	Local	2000	8
7	Discrimination	Stichting Alexander	Local	1996	6

35 out of 82 interviews were held with adults: researchers who accompanied young people conducting the research projects and policy officials, who financed the research and/or were involved in the application of the results. 47 out of 82 interviews were held with young people who participated as researchers. For privacy reasons, no access was permitted to the young people involved in the research project on sexual behaviour.

The cases were characterized by the following method: young people researched other young people, using an open or structured interview. The young researchers were involved in constructing the interview, by generating ideas for questions or by working together on the interview and testing it. In two cases (1 and 4), this method resulted in a questionnaire which the young people spread among their peers. In the other cases, the young researchers all interviewed other young people.

The interviews focused on the way the research was performed, the actions taken to increase scientific quality, the quality of the participation of youth, the effects the research had on policy, young people and adults, and the conditions under which the research took place. Each interview took approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded using qualitative analysing techniques.

For this article, the interview fragments that were coded as a perceived effect were analysed, in order to determine how the social skill perspective taking and the weighing of information can be recognized in the answers of the young researchers. The analysis focused on:

- what young researchers claimed they had learned from the interviews with other young people;
- what young researchers said about their own opinions and those of others.

## Results

The results show that the young researchers claim they have learned about the opinion of others, and that they compare their own opinion with the opinion of others. This comparison leads to several reactions and conclusions on their own opinion. Some young researchers say they still use their experiences.

### Learn about the opinion of others

The young researchers were asked what they gained from participating in the research. 23 of the 47 respondents report that they learned what the opinion of other young people is. They say things like:

- *you learn what other youngsters think*
- *you learn about their opinion*
- *you find out their ideas on the subject*
- *you see what people have written down*
- *I got to know other people better*

A quarter of the interviewed young people report they learned about the research subject. For example the girl who participated as researcher in the research on youth care, although she did not have any experience with the field.

*I didn't know anything about youth care. And now I really learned about it from the inside. That was special, but also sad. Of course you sometimes hear stories but that your homesituation can be that different that is sometimes hard to imagine.*

The respondents report that they have learned about interviewing, organizing, communicating and working together. Three young researchers report they did not learn many new things.

### **Compare your opinion with the opinion of others**

The young researchers who were interviewed tend to compare the opinion of other youngsters with their own opinion. This is illustrated by a girl who, asked about what she liked about it, reported:

*Well, to see the results and to compare these with your own opinion.*

Someone else adds:

*When you read the results, you think 'o, that is what I think of it as well, or - not at all'.*

Comparing the own opinion with the opinion of others leads to two kinds of reactions: recognition and astonishment. There are as many young researchers who report to have recognized the answers as there are young researchers who report they were surprised. Those who recognized the answers of other young people reported that the results were not very new but more a confirmation of what they already thought:

*The results were like I expected they would be. There were no strange things.*

Next to recognition there is also astonishment. Young researchers encounter things they had not expected; or people that they thought they knew telling them things very different from what they would have expected. For example this young researcher who

answers the question ‘what did you think was the most surprising thing you encountered in the interviews?’ as follows:

*I interviewed my sister and I found out that she thought very strictly about a lot of things. For me that was remarkable.*

### **Conclusions on the own opinion**

After comparing their own views with those of others, young researchers evaluate their own views. Several evaluations can be recognized:

1. Other people think the same way I do, my view is okay.
2. Other people take another view, my view is not okay.
3. Other people take another view: they are mistaken.
4. Other people take another view: different people have different views.

These types of evaluations are elaborated on:

1. Other people think the same way I do, my view is okay.

A small number of young researchers who recognized the opinions of other young people, report they liked this, saying for example:

- It is fun to find out that a lot of youngsters see it the same way I do.
- It is good to see that it made sense, that there were more young people who had money problems like we did.
- You find out that you are not the only adolescent that thinks that way.

2. Other people take another view, my view is not okay.

Seven young researchers report that the views of other young people made them rethink their views.

*You can think something about something, but someone else might think something completely different and when you think about that, you think: that might be true, and then you change your own view.*

*When you hear the view of others you are forced to reconsider your own view.*

*When you hear that other people think in a different way, you realize that you sometimes might not be right.*

3. Other people take another view: they are mistaken.

Five young researchers mentioned explicitly that they had difficulties with the view of the young people they interviewed. They tried for example, to make the respondent change his view by asking further questions.

*I remember that there were people who answered the question right away, and that I did not agree. And then I tried to ask 'did you think about this' or 'did you think about that?'. Sometimes, I thought they concluded or answered too fast, and then I clarified the questions. But then there is a risk that they copy your view, something you do not want to happen.*

*By questioning, asking 'why, why do you think that', or saying 'yes, but don't you think that.' posing these questions and then they will find out for themselves that they are not right.*

One respondent notices that other youngsters do not find it easy to recognize that they are wrong.

*Some youngsters were that focused on their being right that they forgot to look at the ideas of other people.*

Another respondent tells he finds it difficult to understand the view of others.

*Sometimes there were people who said they thought it was like that, I couldn't understand that.*

4. Other people take another view: different people have different views.

In all cases there are young researchers who ascertain that others think differently on some topic and from that conclude that different youngsters think differently. A quarter of the young researchers interviewed mentions this. When asked what they learned from the interviews, they answer for example:

- *you find out that everybody has a different view*
- *To have peace with the fact that someone else can have a different opinion*
- *Learned to respect another*
- *Learned not to judge on appearances, to be open minded.*
- *Learned to look at things from different angles*

One girl reports she is more aware that young people think differently on things. A respondent says he deliberately sought to interview different youngsters to find out about differences.

### **Still using the experiences**

11 young researchers report that they still use their experiences to collect views of others in other situations. One respondent reports that he now looks at subjects in a different way because he now understands that there are always more sides to one story. One girl explicitly mentions that she still is curious about the opinions of others:

*You become curious, so later you still want to ask how others think about it.*

## Discussion

The results of the research on the quality of PAR with youth show that those involved experience effects with regard to knowledge-development, policy and young people. This article focused on how perspective taking and weighing information can be recognised in what young researchers claim they learned through participating. They describe several aspects of perspective taking: they listen to the opinions of other young people. Then, the confrontation between their own view and the views of others leads to reconsidering the own perspective. This reconsideration leads to confirmation of their own view, adapting their own view, evaluating the views of others or recognizing that there are several views, without reconsidering their own view. Few respondents report to have practiced perspective taking skills in other situations.

When interpreting these results, it is important to take into account that this research did not measure whether young people gained perspective taking skills through participating in PAR with youth. Collot d'Escury and Hengst (2006) already mention that there are few methods or instruments to actually measure perspective taking skills. This research did not follow an experimental research design. Equally important is to bear in mind that acquiring certain skills in a given context does not mean that the same skills are applied in a different setting. Researching a training on perspective taking skills aimed at mild mentally disabled children, Collot d'Escury and Hengst found out that 'knowing how to' does not mean that the skill is actually applied in practice. Furthermore, they found out that learning perspective taking skills does not mean that the mild mentally disabled youngsters hold onto these skills after the training. Gehlbach (2004) argues that for applying perspective taking skills, besides the skills themselves, motivation and context are important factors.

Although this research points out that perspective taking skills can be recognized in the skills young people say they have learned through participating in the research, this does not guarantee that they use these skills in another setting. A lack of motivation, contextual factors – for example environments that do not value or stimulate skills like listening or putting oneself into another's position – or simply forgetting about the learned skills can all influence the extent to which the skill is actually applied.

Further research on this theme should focus on a few questions. Firstly, it would be interesting to find out through an experimental setting whether young people enhance their perspective taking skills; and next, which factors influence young people to continue using the skills in other contexts. Secondly, it would be interesting to find out which personal characteristics lead to which reaction. In this article, four different reactions on encountering someone else's perspectives were described. It would be interesting to know what makes young people give certain reactions and what factors cause these reactions. The final question that remains to be answered is if and how the process of perspective taking influences the quality of the knowledge that is produced by PAR with youth.



## References

- Alder, C. & Sandor, D. (1990). Youth researching Youth. In: *Youth Studies*. 1990, November.
- Beers, H. van, (1996). A plea for a child-centered approach in research with street children. In: *Childhood, a global journal of child research*. Vol. 3(2), Mei 1996: 195-201.
- Bemak, F. (1996). Street researchers: A new paradigm redefining future research with street children. In: *Childhood: A global journal of child research*. Vol. 3(2), Mei 1996: 147-156.
- Berk, L.A. (2003). *Child development. 6th edition*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Chalmers, J.B. & Townsend, M.A.R. (1990). The effects of training in social perspective taking on socially maladjusted girls. In: *Child development*. Volume: 61, february 1990, Issue 1, P178-191.
- Checkoway, B. & Richards-Schuster, K. (2003). Youth participation in Community Evaluation Research. In: *American Journal of Evaluation*. Vol 24, No 1, 2003: 21-33.
- Cole, P. (1981). *Participation projects*. Melbourne: Victorian Institute of Secondary Education.
- Collot d'Escury, A., Barnhard, A., & Hartsink, D. (2004). Sociale vaardigheden in perspectief: kunnen LVG-jongeren perspectief nemen? In: *Onderzoek & praktijk*, 1, 22-31.
- Collot d'Escury, A., Hengst, E. (2006). Een training in perspectiefnemen en sociale vaardigheden in de praktijk in beeld. In: *Onderzoek & Praktijk*. Najaar 2006, jaargang 4 nr.2.
- Corcoran, K. (2000) Adult Attachment, Self-Efficacy, Perspective taking and conflict resolution. In: *Journal of Counseling & Development*. 2000, vol. 78, issue 4, p.473-483.
- Dallape, F. (1996). Urban children: a challenge and an opportunity. In: *Childhood: a global journal of child research*. Vol. 3(2), May 1996: 283-294.
- Dixon, J.A. and Moore, C.F. (1990) *The Development of perspective taking, understanding differences in information and weighting*. In: *Child development* 1990, 61, 1502-1513.
- Epley, N.; Morewedge, C.K.; Keysar, B. *Journal of experimental social psychology*, Volume: 40 Issue: 6 (November 2004), pp: 760-768
- Fenigstein, A. & Abrams, D. (1993) Self-attention and the egocentric assumption of shared perspectives. In: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 1993, 29, p 287-303.
- Frankenberger, K. (2000) Adolescent egocentrism: a comparison among adolescents and adults. In: *Journal of adolescence*. 2000, 23, p343-354.
- Gehlbach, H. (2004) A new perspective on perspective taking: a multidimensional approach to conceptualizing an aptitude. In: *Educational Psychology Review*. September 2004, Vol. 16, nr 3.
- Gerris, J.R.M., Dekovic, M., & Janssens, J.M.A.M. (1997). The relationship between social class and childrearing behaviors: parents' perspective taking and value orientations. In: *Journal of marriage and the family*. Volume: 59, november 1997, issue: 4. p 834 – 848.
- Gillespie, A. (2006) Games and the development of perspective taking. In: *Human Development* 2006;49:87-92.
- Goossens, L. & Jackson, S. (2006) *Handbook of adolescent development*. Hove UK: Psychology press.

Jurrius, K. (2007) *Perspective taking in PAR with Youth*. Researching Children conference, Innsbrück

GGD Amsterdam, (2006). *Seksueel gedrag in een subcultuur van tieners in Amsterdam Zuidoost*. Amsterdam: GGD.

Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation. From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: Unicef Innocenti Essays nr.4.

Hart, R. (1997). *Children's Participation. The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. New York: Unicef.

Hazekamp, J.L. (1999). Young People Active in Youth Research: an Innovative Approach. In: *Social Work in Europe* Vol. 6, 1999, n° 3.

Hazekamp, J.L. (2003). Onderzoek in handen van jongeren. Een bijdrage tot een dialoog tussen jongeren en volwassenen. In: De Winter, M. & Kroneman, M. (2003). *Participatief jeugdonderzoek*. Utrecht: Van Gorcum.

Johnson, D.W. (1975) Cooperativeness and social perspective taking. In: *Journal of Pers. Social Psychology*, 31: 241-244.

Jong, I. de, (2004). *Jongeren en hun hulpverleningsplan*. Utrecht: Collegio.

Jurrius, K., & Havinga, L. (2004). *Happy in Tiel. Jongeren over de geluks- en gezondheidsbeleving van jongeren in Tiel-West*. Amsterdam: Stichting Alexander.

Jurrius, K., Straatsma, A. & Strating, G. (2004). *Over kattenkwaad en eieren die tijd nodig hebben. Jongeren en ouders over jeugdreclassering en Halt Friesland*. Amsterdam: Stichting Alexander.

Jurrius, K. (2005) Participatief jongerenonderzoek maakt kwaliteitsslag. In: *Tijdschrift voor jeugdzorg*. November 2005.

Jurrius, K. (2006) *Tokenism in PAR with Youth*. World Congres of Action Research, 2006.

Kefyalew, F. (1996). The reality of child participation in research. Experience from a capacity building programme. In: *Childhood*. Vol. 3. 1996: 203-213.

Moonen, X.M.H. (2006). *Verblijf, beeld en ervaringen, van jongeren opgenomen in een orthopedagogisch centrum voor jeugdigen met een licht verstandelijke beperking*. Universiteit Utrecht.

Nieuwenhuys, O. (1997). Spaces for Children of the Urban Poor. Experiences with Participatory Action Research (PAR). In: *Environment and Urbanization*. Apr. 1997, 9(1) 233-249.

Noom, M., & De Winter, M. (2001). *Op zoek naar verbondenheid. Zwerfjongeren aan het woord over de verbetering van de hulpverlening*. Utrecht: Nederlands platform zwerfjongeren/Universiteit Utrecht.

Pehlivan, T. (2003). *Iedereen doet mee! Wijkraadpleging Utrecht Zuid-West*. Amsterdam: Stichting Alexander.

Penuel, W.R. & Freeman, T. (1997). Participatory action research in youth programming. A theory in use. In: *Child and youth care forum*. Vol 26(3) 1997 June: 175-185.

Pieper, I. (2003). *De gemeente moet gewoon meedoen met de jeugd*. Amsterdam: Stichting Alexander.

Seifert, K. & Hoffnung, R. (1997). *Child and adolescent development*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Selman, R.L. (1980). *The growth of interpersonal understanding*. New York: Academic Press.

Jurrius, K. (2007) *Perspective taking in PAR with Youth*. Researching Children conference, Innsbrück

Westerlaak, M. van, (2003). Beleidsmakers gezocht (m/v 0 t/m 23). Jongerenraadplegingen en verbetergroepen in Amersfoort. In: De Winter, M. & Kroneman, M. (2003). *Participatief jeugdonderzoek*. Utrecht: Van Gorcum.

Wilkins, V., Bryans, K., & Hetzel, S. (1993). Youth participation in Youth-focused research. In: *Youth studies Australia*, September 01, 1993.

Winter, M. de, & Kroneman, M. (2003). *Participatief jeugdonderzoek*. Utrecht: Van Gorcum.

### **Contact information**

Drs. Kitty Jurrius  
Stichting Alexander  
Herenmarkt 93-c  
1013 EC Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
T: 0031 20 626 3929  
F: 0031 20 622 8590  
jurrius@st-alexander.nl